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POLICY ISSUES: STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Report on the Global Environment Outlook

Background

1. The Global Environment Outlook report has been prepared in response to Governing Council decision 18/27 C of 26 May 1996, requesting the Executive Director to submit a first report in the new state-of-the-environment report series to the nineteenth session of the Council. An executive summary of the first report of the Global Environment Outlook series is annexed to the present document. The full report (in English) will be available to the Council.

2. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) identified 20 internationally renowned environmental institutions as Global Environment Outlook collaborating centres, and instituted a mechanism for regional consultations, four scientific working groups and United Nations agency participation through the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch. In all, some 450 experts, including many government experts, participated in the preparation of Global Environment Outlook-1.

3. The momentum, capabilities and networks of institutions and experts thus created are important assets not only for UNEP but also in support of international scientific environmental assessment efforts, which will substantively contribute towards the integration of environmental considerations into decision-making for sustainable development.

4. In the light of General Assembly resolution 50/110 of 20 December 1995, entitled "Report of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme", and in view of the significant contribution which might be

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derived from the present report to the debate of the General Assembly at its special session on the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21, it is proposed that the present report constitute an integral part of the report of the Governing Council to the General Assembly at its special session.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Note with appreciation the timely production of the new, comprehensive report on the state of the world environment, Global Environment Outlook-1, as requested in Council decision 18/27 C, as well as the participatory assessment process (known as the Global Environment Outlook process) which has been established to support United Nations Environment Programme assessment activities, and its components (the scientific working groups, network of collaborating centres, regional and United Nations-wide consultative mechanisms);

2. Concur with the Executive Director's proposal to include the executive summary of the present report, together with the views of the Council thereon, as an integral part of the report of the Council to the special session of the General Assembly on the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 and to make the full text of the Global Environment Report available to the General Assembly at that session;

3. Approve the continuation of the Global Environment Outlook process and the production of the biennial Global Environment Outlook reports, following the guidelines set out in decision 18/27 C, taking into consideration the recommendations pertaining to future Global Environment Outlook reports which have emerged from the Global Environment Outlook process and subject to the allocation of adequate funding;

4. Urge Governments, United Nations agencies and bodies, and other institutions to participate in, and contribute to, the future activities of the Global Environment Outlook process;

5. Urge Governments to take into account the findings and recommendations of Global Environment Outlook-1 in the development and implementation of their environmental assessment and management actions;

6. Urge major report producers to collaborate and use a common data and knowledge base, comprising indicators, models, scenarios and expert systems, in order to avoid duplication, save cost and ensure that global reports are mutually supportive. Each agency would thus approach sustainable development from its particular perspective, while taking advantage of the information in the other reports to get a complete picture of sustainable development;

7. Request the Executive Director to submit the next report in the Global Environment Outlook series (Global Environment Outlook-2) for the consideration of the Governing Council at its twentieth regular session.

Annex

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT OUTLOOK-1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This first report in the biennial Global Environment Outlook series was initiated in response to the environmental reporting requirements of Agenda 21 and to the UNEP Governing Council decision of May 1995 requesting production of a new, comprehensive report on the state of the world environment in time for the UNEP Governing Council in January 1997. The decision recognized the need to advance consensus on several essential environmental issues and on the implementation of the recommendations of Agenda 21. The report is a snapshot of an ongoing worldwide environmental assessment process.

2. A regional and participatory process was used to produce Global Environment Outlook-1. Input was solicited from 20 regional collaborating centres, United Nations organizations and independent experts. Draft chapters benefited from discussions and recommendations of participants in regional consultations, which also provided valuable suggestions for the improvement and future direction of the Global Environment Outlook series. In later reports, the regional inputs will be strengthened through the further development of the global network of collaborating centres.

A. Global overview

3. The Global Environment Outlook-1 report shows that significant progress has been made in the last decade in confronting environmental challenges in both developing and industrial regions. Worldwide, the greatest progress has been in the realm of institutional developments, international cooperation, public participation and the emergence of private-sector action. Legal frameworks, economic instruments, environmental impact assessment methodologies, environmentally sound technologies and cleaner production processes have been developed and applied. As a result, several countries report marked progress in curbing environmental pollution and slowing the rate of resource degradation, as well as reducing the intensity of resource use. The rate of environmental degradation in several developing countries has been slower than that experienced by industrial countries when they were at a similar stage of economic development.

4. Nevertheless, from a global perspective, the environment has continued to degrade during the last decade, and significant environmental problems remain deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of nations in all regions. Progress towards a global sustainable future is just too slow and the necessary sense of urgency is lacking. Internationally and nationally, the funds and political will are insufficient to halt further global environmental degradation and to address the most pressing environmental issues - even though the technology and knowledge are available to do so. The recognition of environmental issues as necessarily long-term and cumulative, with serious global and security implications, remains limited. The reconciliation of environment and trade regimes in a fair and equitable manner still remains a major challenge. The continued preoccupation with immediate local and national issues and a general lack of sustained interest in global and long-term environmental issues remain major impediments to environmental progress internationally. Global governance structures and

global environmental solidarity remain too weak to make progress a world-wide reality. As a result, the gap is widening between what has been achieved thus far and what is realistically needed.

5. In the future, the continued degradation of natural resources, shortcomings in environmental responses, and renewable resource constraints may increasingly lead to food insecurity and conflict situations. Changes in global biogeochemical cycles and the complex interactions between environmental problems such as climate change, ozone layer depletion, and acidification may have impacts that will confront local, regional, and global communities with situations for which they are quite unprepared. Previously unknown risks to human health are becoming evident from the cumulative and persistent effects of a whole range of chemicals, particularly the persistent organic pollutants (POPs). The effects of climate variability and change are already increasing the incidence of familiar public health problems and leading to new ones, including a more extensive reach of vector-borne diseases and a higher incidence of heat-related illness and mortality. Global Environment Outlook-1 substantiates the need for the world to embark on major structural changes and to pursue with vigour environmental and associated social and economic policies.

B. Regional status and trends

6. Global Environment Outlook-1 confirms both striking similarities and marked differences among regions in terms of the environmental issues which are of primary concern today. Although poverty and the growing global population are often targeted as responsible for much of the degradation of the world's resources, other factors - such as wealth, the inefficient use of resources (including those of others), waste generation, pollution from industry, and wasteful consumption patterns - are equally driving us towards an environmental precipice.

7. In the report, prominence is initially given to issues associated with poverty alleviation, food security and development, namely, natural resource management to control land degradation, provide an adequate water supply, and protect forests from overexploitation and coastal zones from irreversible degradation. Attention is then given to issues associated with increasing industrialization. Such problems include uncontrolled urbanization and infrastructure development, energy and transport expansion, the increased use of chemicals, and waste production. More affluent societies focus on individual and global health and well-being, the intensity of resource use, heavy reliance on chemicals and the impact of climate change and ozone destruction, as well as remaining alert to the long-term protection needs of natural resources.

C. Regional policy responses

8. The review of policy responses to environmental issues in different regions indicates that, typically, these responses focus first on institutional and constitutional issues, and then on the implementation and enforcement of often disjointed sectoral environmental legislation and regulations. Subsequent actions concentrate on developing comprehensive strategic and integrated plans for the protection of the environment, such as national environmental action plans, and an array of concerted command-and-

control measures. Later, attention is given to introducing market-based incentives, creating conducive environments for voluntary, flexible, and innovative actions and stimulating increased participation and commitment by all sectors of society.

9. Progression through the cascade of policy responses is often constrained in developing regions by weak institutions, insufficient human and financial resources, ineffective legislation, and a lack of compliance monitoring and enforcement capabilities. In other instances, environmental institutions and regulations have been introduced at the request of external forces, such as international conventions and strategies, donor requirements, and structural adjustment programmes, and are only later internalized by countries.

10. In the more developed regions of the world, experience with environmental management and conservation is extensive and of longer duration. Today, countries are increasingly using a mix of command-and-control policies and market-based incentives to achieve cleaner and more resource-efficient production systems and to modify consumers' attitudes. More integrated approaches that rely on cleaner production processes and accounting on a cradle-to-grave basis have not yet been used to their full potential anywhere.

11. Although there is repeated acknowledgement of both the vicious cycle of poverty and its intrinsic linkages with the environment and the urgency to address poverty alleviation, little evidence emerged from the regional reports that effective and concerted actions have been taken since Rio to ensure that environmental policies benefit the poorest members of society. A vacuum still remains at the national level for linking environmental protection to social investment, such as education, better health care and employment generation for the poor, especially women.

12. Empowerment of communities and the growth of environment-oriented non-governmental organizations in civil society are increasingly recognized in all regions as powerful mechanisms to advance sustainable development. Another heartening sign is the tendency to strengthen regional and subregional cooperation worldwide. This might well prove to be one of the most powerful mechanisms to move national and global institutions forward towards sustainable development.

D. Looking to the future

13. The first Global Environment Outlook report concludes with an exploration, based on model analyses, of what we might expect in the future for a selected number of environmental issues if no major policy reforms are initiated. The results in this final chapter confirm trends revealed by the regional chapters. They highlight the integrated nature of the environment and underscore the need for a more systematic analysis of linkages between environment, social, economic, institutional, and cultural sectors and among different environmental issues, such as biodiversity, climate, land, and water.

E. The way ahead

14. Worldwide, rapid and profound changes are occurring in many social, institutional, and economic systems. The continued impoverishment of large parts of the global population, increased disparities both within and between nations, and rapid globalization - particularly through developments in information technology, transport, and trade regimes - are observed. In many countries, there are trends towards the decentralization of environment responsibilities from national to subnational authorities, an increasing role for the transnational corporations in environmental stewardship and policy development, and a move towards integrated environmental policies and management practices. The increased willingness of Governments to cooperate on a global basis is evidenced by the large number of world summits in the last decade. The question arises, however, as to how this willingness is translated into concrete and effective actions. There is greater recognition and popular insistence that the wealth of nations and the well-being of individuals lie not just in economic capital, but in social and natural capital as well.

15. Against this background of change, a number of fundamental global environmental trends emerge in the Global Environment Outlook-1 report:

(a) The use of renewable resources - land, forest, fresh water, coastal areas, fisheries, and urban air - is beyond their natural regeneration capacity and is therefore unsustainable;

(b) Greenhouses gases are still being emitted at levels higher than the stabilization target internationally agreed upon under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change;

(c) Natural areas and the biodiversity they contain are bound to diminish as a result of the expansion of agricultural land and human settlements;

(d) The increasing, pervasive use and spread of chemicals to fuel economic development is causing major health risks, environmental contamination, and disposal problems;

(e) Global developments in the energy sector are unsustainable;

(f) Rapid, unplanned urbanization, particularly in coastal areas, is placing major stress on adjacent ecosystems;

(g) The complex and often little understood interactions among global biogeochemical cycles are leading to widespread acidification, climate variability, changes in the hydrological cycles, and the loss of biodiversity, biomass, and bioproductivity.

16. There are also wide-spread social trends, intrinsically linked to the environment, that have negative feedback effects on environmental trends, notably:

(a) An increase in inequality, both between and within nations, in a world that is generally healthier and wealthier;

(b) A continuation, at least in the near future, of hunger and poverty despite the fact that, at the global level, sufficient food is available; and

(c) Greater human health risks resulting from continued resource degradation and chemical pollution.

17. Four key priority areas emerge from the Global Environment Outlook-1 report for immediate, enhanced, and concerted action by the international community if the world is to reverse the negative environmental trends highlighted in the Global Environment Outlook-1 report. Economic cost-benefit analyses will need to be conducted in conjunction with concerted international action in these areas:

1. Energy efficiency and renewable energy resources

18. Current patterns of energy use require drastic changes, because of their destructive impacts on land and natural resources, climate, air quality, rural and urban settlements, and human health and well-being. The need for ever higher levels of energy to fuel economic development in all regions of the world and the absence of significant worldwide advances in the development and application of alternative energy sources and increased energy efficiency will inevitably exacerbate environmental degradation. Alternative energy sources need to be vigorously pursued and their application enhanced. Energy efficiency still needs to be greatly improved, and emissions need to be reduced. Consideration should be given to declaring an energy decade, or even decades, until such time as energy sustainability is reached.

2. Appropriate and environmentally sound technologies worldwide

19. Appropriate technological improvements, which result in more effective use of natural resources, less waste, and fewer pollutant by-products, are required in all economic sectors. Truly global availability and worldwide application of best available and appropriate technology and production processes, including best traditional practices, need to be ensured through the exchange and dissemination of know-how, skills and technology and through appropriate finance mechanisms. Despite years of deliberation, countries have yet to agree on how to reach consensus on international mechanisms to serve the vital interests of both developers of technologies and those countries that need access to them, as well as on international finance mechanisms.

3. Global action on fresh water

20. Water will be the major impediment to further development in several regions. Greater efforts are needed to resolve issues related to land-based sources of pollution, non-point source runoff from agricultural and urban areas, protection of groundwater reserves, water pricing, the impact of development projects on ecosystems, and competing demands for water among different social sectors, among rural and urban communities, and among riparian countries. Globally, a much stronger, more integrated and extensive programme on water is required, including action to address food-related and health-related freshwater issues.

4. Benchmark data and integrated assessments

21. Assessments are required continually to guide rational and effective decision-making for environmental policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation at local, national, regional, and global levels. To improve the global capability for keeping the environment under continuous review, urgent action is required on several fronts:

(a) Investment in new and better national data collection and harmonization, and in the acquisition of global datasets;

(b) Increased understanding of the linkages among different environmental issues, as well as of the interactions between environment and development;

(c) Enhanced capabilities for integrated assessment and forecasting, and the analysis of the environmental impact of alternative policy options;

(d) Better translation of scientific results into a format readily usable by policy-makers and the general public; and

(e) The development of cost-effective, meaningful and useful methods for monitoring environmental trends and policy impacts at local, national, regional, and global levels.

22. To achieve advances in one or all of these key areas for action, a change in the hearts and minds of everyone will be required, along with a worldwide transition towards resource equity and resource efficiency. The necessary financial resources will have to be made available at national and international levels. Estimates have indicated that if 2-3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) could be devoted to environmental education, protection, and restoration, great strides could be made in halting the progress of major negative environmental trends. Implementing the pledges made at Rio to increase development aid to the equivalent of 0.7 per cent of industrial countries' GDP and to provide new additional funding is the prerequisite for initiating action to reverse global environmental degradation.